Chronos, Kairos, and the Vector Space of Desire in Lacanian Psychoanalysis

Iraj E. Ghoochani

In *Analyzed by Lacan: A Personal Account*, Betty Milan[1] offers a rare glimpse into the often-misunderstood clinical practice of Jacques Lacan. In her revealing anecdote, she recounts a conversation in which Lacan directly addressed the controversy surrounding his variable-length sessions. Lacan's habit for unexpected interruptions of the sessions is well-known. According to Milan, Lacan dismissed the accusation that he shortened sessions to increase the number of patients he could see, and therefore, his earnings. Instead, Lacan explained that his decision to end sessions before the traditional 45-minute mark was driven by a more profound logic: it was not about the **Chronos**—the linear, quantitative time measured by the clock—but about **Kairos**—the opportune moment within the session when a crucial insight or shift in the patient's psychic structure could be reached.

Lacan's insistence that the Kairos determines the session's duration forces us to reevaluate the dynamics of time in psychoanalysis. He already divided the time into chronological and logical time but Kairos is new at least to this writer. Rather than adhering to the Chronos of the International Psychoanalytic Association's (IPA) i.e. standardized 45-minute session, Lacan introduced a revolutionary understanding of the psychoanalytic encounter. He cuts the session to force the analysand to listen to herself/himself. Analysand turns into its own analyst.

The session, for Lacan, was not bound to the clock but to the field of discourse itself. It was dictated by the moment when the truth of the unconscious could be best articulated, recognized, or experienced. Kairos, in this context, is the *qualitative* time in which meaning emerges, making Lacan's sessions not shorter but rather precisely timed to the logic of the patient's speech and desire. This way of handling with time is the key to understand te logic behind his graph of desire. In this essay, It is tried to show that the dynamic interplay between Chronos and Kairos is the very structure of desire and subjectivity reflected in Lacan's graph of desire.

Kairos, the Winged Moment of Transformation

We have to know Kairos better. The concept of Kairos is richly illustrated in an epigram attributed to Poseidippos von Pella (3rd century B.C.), which stages a dialogue between the observer and Kairos:

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[1] Milan, Betty. *Analyzed by Lacan: A Personal Account*. Bloomsbury, November 2023. Paperback, 160 pages. ISBN 13: 9798765106198, ISBN 10: 8765106199.

Who are you?
-I am Kairos, who conquers all!
Why are you running on tiptoes?
-I, Kairos, run ceaselessly.
Why do you have wings on your feet?
-I fly like the wind.
Why do you carry a sharp knife in your hand?
-To remind people that I am sharper than a blade.
Why does a lock of hair fall on your forehead?
-So that whoever meets me can seize me.
Why are you bald at the back of your head?
-Once I have flown by on my swift feet, no one can catch me from behind, no matter how hard they try.
And why did the artist create you?
-To teach you wanderers a lesson.

– *Gründel 1996, Sp. 1131*[2]

This dialogue pictures Kairos as a figure of decisive, fleeting moments that must be grasped when encountered, for they do not return. The image of Kairos running on tiptoes with wings on his feet immediately fetches the image of Hermes into mind: the one who bears wings on his head. Whereas Hermes is the god of communication and swift movement, Kairos is more elusive—he represents the moment of opportunity that moves quickly and secretively silent: like a thief he must be seized before it slips away.

The sharp knife in Kairos's hand symbolizes the cutting edge of time, a metaphor that resonates with Lacan's own clinical practice: the instance when the Real—the unsymbolized, disruptive force in the psyche—cuts into the voice to voice itself. Just as Kairos is described as sharper than a blade, the moment of intervention in psychoanalysis must be precise, able to penetrate the chronological flesh of the patient's enunciation. Chronological because it ticks like a clock in its cumpulsions and repetitions _and as most of the patients that appear in the room of analysis are nervouses_ let say in its melancholic mood. Melancholy is chronic.

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[2] Loose translation of: *Wer bist du?/ Ich bin Kairos, der alles bezwingt!/ Warum läufst du auf Zehenspitzen?/ Ich, der Kairos, laufe unablässig./ Warum hast du Flügel am Fuß?/ Ich fliege wie der Wind./ Warum trägst du in deiner Hand ein spitzes Messer?/ Um die Menschen daran zu erinnern, dass ich spitzer bin als ein Messer./ Warum fällt dir eine Haarlocke in die Stirn?/ Damit mich ergreifen kann, wer mir begegnet./ Warum bist du am Hinterkopf kahl?/ Wenn ich mit fliegendem Fuß erst einmal vorbeigeglitten bin, wird mich auch keiner von hinten erwischen, so sehr er sich auch bemüht./ Und wozu schuf dich der Künstler?/ Euch Wanderern zur Belehrung.*

The image of Kairos with wings on his feet, emphasizes the fleeting and elusive nature of these moments. The psychoanalyst must remain vigilant, poised to seize the moment when the patient's discourse opens up a path to the Real. The cut in the session, whether by ending it abruptly or making a sudden intervention, reflects the sharp knife that Kairos wields—cutting through the order at the precise moment when desire surfaces.

Why does this crucial idea—so present in Lacan's clinical practice as described by Betty Milan—not appear more overtly in his theoretical writings? Although Kairos is not explicitly named in *Écrits*, its *logic* is present through the concept of the cut as well as the *logical time*. The analytic act—particularly the ending of a session or the strategic intervention—operates on the principle of Kairos. The analyst must cut into the flow of the patient's speech at the right moment to allow the Real to surface or put an index on it whenever it surfaces by itself. However Lacan never uses the term directly or at least as a part of his body of terms. Then, It's possible that Lacan viewed Kairos as a principle more suited to clinical practice than to the theoretical explorations in his *Écrits* or elsewhere.

Dialectic of Seeing: On the left, Santo Saccomanno's *The Waiting Chronos* (1876), Monumentalfriedhof Staglieno, Genoa: Chronos, the god of time, sits in contemplation, embodying the weight of linear time as an eternal burden. On the right, Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I* (1514): The angel, surrounded by symbols of knowledge and creation, remains frozen in melancholic introspection under the looming presence of Chronos' hourglass. Together, these images evoke a *dialectic of seeing*, a term inspired by Walter Benjamin, where time and temporality are juxtaposed as oppressive forces, awaiting the decisive intervention of Kairos—the moment that can cut through the stasis of endless duration.

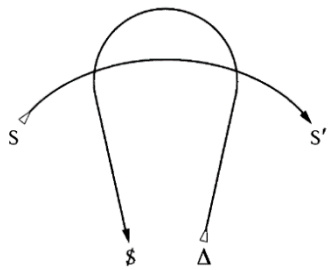
Lacan's ideas were heavily influenced by classical rhetoric, including Aristotle, Stoics and Sophists, but he often transformed these ideas in

subtle ways. Kairos, a key term in ancient Greek rhetoric, may have informed Lacan's clinical techniques more subtly. Lacan often reframed or even subverted classical ideas, making them harder to identify directly in his writing. His emphasis on punctuation**,** interpretation**,** and momentary intervention might be a psychoanalytic adaptation of Kairos. Then, while Kairos is not explicitly named, its logic permeates Lacan’s practice: in the clinic, Kairos remains essential—operating through the cut.

The Orthogonality of Time: Chronos and Kairos in the Graph of Desire

To fully grasp the significance of Kairos in Lacan’s practice/praxis it is crucial to understand its relationship to Chronos and how this relationship manifests in the Graph of Desire. Chronos, the time of clocks and calendars, represents objective time, the linear and measurable progression of moments. It is the time that dominates everyday life and organizes the external world and accordingly the practical language. In contrast, Kairos represents subjective time, the opportune moment where the potential for change or insight appears within the psychic structure. This moment cuts into the Chronos for instance the continious flow of the enunciation, introducing an orthogonal dimension that disrupts the smooth continuity of time. Lacan’s Graph of Desire offers a way of conceptualizing this relationship. The graph is not merely a representation of unconscious processes but functions as a vector space where subjective positions/oordinations are traced. In this vector field, Kairos can be understood as an intrusion of the cut**:** quilting point (*point de capiton*) —the point at which signifiers are anchored and meaning is stitched to a voice. The quilting point does not occur in the steady flow of Chronos but rather emerges as a vertical incision—a Kairotic moment is a door to Real.

GRAPH I



This is what might be called its elementary cell (see Graph 1). In it is articulated what I have called the “button tie” [*point de capiton*], by which the signifier stops the otherwise indefinite sliding of signification. The signifying chain is assumed to be borne by the vector $\overrightarrow{S.S'}$. Without even going into the subtleties of the negatively oriented direction in which its double intersection with the vector $\overrightarrow{\Delta.\$}$ occurs—only in this latter vector does one see the fish it hooks, a fish less suitable for representing what it withdraws from our grasp in its vigorous swimming than the intention that tries to drown it in the flood-tide of pre-text, namely, the reality that is imagined in the ethological schema of the return of need.

This orthogonality between Chronos and Kairos reflects in the vectors of the Graph of Desire**.** The quilting point, then, is the intersection of these two temporalities—where the flow of Chronos meets the orthogonal vertical incision of Kairos. This is how the analytic act operates within this *Graph of Desire*. Chronos lays the groundwork, the continuous flow of enunciation, but it is Kairos that punctuates this flow with moments of decisive transformation, moments that reshape the subject’s relationship to the **Real** and the **Symbolic**. This relationship is not a mere duality but a *vectorial interaction*, where the vector of

Kairos constantly intersects with that of Chronos, creating the *quilting points* that stabilize(?) meaning, if only temporarily.

The graph embodies the concept of Surtur: the mythic figure of rupture and destruction—this is the function of Kairos. The analyst's intervention is not simply a matter of timing in the conventional sense but is about recognizing the *qualitative moment* when the patient's speech opens up to the Real. It is at this point that the quilting point is created as the true creator of the scene: the one that restructures the desire as the structure.

Freud's Q and Qη: The Analogue to Chronos and Kairos

To deepen our exploration of the relationship between Chronos and Kairos, we can look to Freud's early project, the *Entwurf einer Psychologie*, where he introduced the distinction between **Q** (quantity) and **Qη** (neuronal quality). These concepts bear resemblance to the orthogonal relationship between Chronos and Kairos in Lacanian psychoanalysis. In Freud's model, **Q** represents the *quantitative flow* of energy through the nervous system. On the other hand, **Qη** is a more complex notion—described as *neuronal quality*. Freud envisioned **Qη** as representing the *qualitative* changes that occur at specific points in the mind's circuitry. These changes do not follow the steady, quantitative flow of **Q** but instead mark moments of intensity and transformation**.** This is where **Qη** aligns with Kairos: the decisive moment that cuts into a linear flow (**Q** or enunciation of practical speech). Just as Kairos interrupts Chronos with its orthogonal incision, **Qη** disrupts the flow of **Q** with its *qualitative* shifts. This produces a sort of *psychical change* that its nature remains unknown due to ontological nature of orthogonality that rules over the relation between *quantity* and *quality.* For example a quantitative stimuli causes pain or pleasure or … causes something qualitative. Something that could not be explained by exact science. Pain is Real. The same happens when Kairos interrupts. The space folds on itself in orthogonality and this causes disorientation, invisibility, space of ambiguity: the vector space, a pool ruled by the unseen flow of jouissance. This is perhaps what the graph of desire is showing us. In both cases there is something Real that escapes every reduction onto flat, lie space. In both cases s out of the blue something unexpected erupts the flow and order of the things.

In both Freud's *Entwurf* and Lacan's *Graph of Desire*, there is an implicit acknowledgment that the subjective experience (of time) is more than mere chronological progression. *Moments of intensity*—whether they are described as **Qη** or Kairos—play a crucial role in shaping our psychic landscape. These moments represent the *points of transformation* where the subject encounters something beyond the Symbolic order, something that cannot be fully captured in the continuous flow of time or energy.

The Cut and the Moment of Truth

The cut functions as the critical moment where time, in its steady progression, is interrupted by the unexpected—an arrow that comes from without and hits the heart of within: a rupture that allows the *Real* to emerge or better to say: to return. The cupid is the best figure to show this emerge/return mechanism: a child that do not know the love of adults sews them with its arrow. Then the cupid is the story of Emma that we discussed in one other essay. The erotic love as an event has its origin in precocious sexual release (releasing an arrow). similarly Lacan views Kairos (he enjoyed this opportunity not to call him by name) as the *opportune moment* in psychoanalysis when the analyst's intervention creates a break in the flow of Chronos, allowing desire to reconstitute itself by returning to its place: the split subject. This orthogonality between Chronos and Kairos, between **Q** and **Qη**, points to the split subject a the core of psychoanalytic work: the ability to recognize and seize the *decisive moment*, when the structure of desire can be rewired, and the relation of this split subject to the **Real** can be transformed: a shift in the bar. It is in these Kairotic moments, where the *quilting point* stitches together meaning as the trace of a new bar, that psychoanalysis makes its most profound impact. Again, psychoanalysis, in its essence, is about recognizing the critical moments where transformation is possible.

The combat between love and chastity: For a cubid these two points are inverted: chastity chases love by creating it. This is poincarre space : the arrow hits itself like emma causing disorientation: the pleasure that was without in the grin of the shopkeeper raised from within by her attraction toward one of the shop-boys revealind a immense sense oof disorientation. Charli chaplin is also the poincarre space. The same is true for the magic squarand the whole modular arithmetic and the clock. Then the clock is the cubid.

Pierre Mignard - Chronos Clipping Cupid's Wings (1694): We can read Pierre Mignard’s painting as "time winds the clock": By clipping Cupid’s wings, Chronos binds desire within the rigid frameworks of temporal progression. This act reflects the concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, the deferred action or retroactive re-signification central to psychoanalysis—much like the case of Emma's precocious introduction to love and sexuality in Freud's early work, where a past experience gains new meaning under the influence of later events.

Chronos, Melancholia, and Dürer: The Weight of Time

As we approach the conclusion of this exploration of *Chronos* and *Kairos*, it becomes necessary to consider how *Chronos*, the relentless and linear march of time, relates to *melancholia*—particularly through the lens of *Albrecht Dürer’s iconic engraving Melencolia I* (1514). Here, *Chronos* reveals its oppressive weight, contrasting with the disruptive potential of *Kairos*, which we have previously likened to the *cut* in psychoanalytic sessions. In Dürer’s engraving, we see a brooding figure of an angel, surrounded by symbolic objects—a balance, a polyhedron, a magic square, and various tools—yet deeply absorbed in contemplation, frozen by the weight of an unresolved thought. Above the angel’s head floats a *sandglass*, symbolizing *Chronos*: the incessant passage of time, trickling grain by grain, without respite or intervention. The *hourglass* embodies the monotony of *Chronos*, the objective, clock-driven time that governs both the external world and the melancholic soul trapped in its circular rumination. The relentless flow of *Chronos* imposes an unyielding structure on the melancholic subject, a structure that can exacerbate the sense of being locked in an eternal, irresolvable stasis.

This fixation on the passing of *Chronos* mirrors the experience of *melancholia* as described by Freud in his essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917). Here, *melancholia* arises when the subject becomes fixated on the lost object, unable to perform the symbolic work of mourning that would allow them to *move forward* in *Chronos*. Instead, the melancholic becomes *paralyzed* by the weight of the past, as if time itself has become a burdensome chain.

Yet within Dürer’s image, there are also hints of *Kairos*—the *cut* that could free the melancholic from this endless loop: it would be a *decisive moment*, a *Kairotic intervention* capable of disrupting the melancholic state and opening the possibility of *reconfiguration*. The tools around the angel, though currently idle, remind us that transformation is always latent within the melancholic condition. *Kairos*, the winged moment, appears at the very instant/distant: a cut made into the *linear fabric* of *Chronos*, offering a way out of the closed loop of melancholy.

Chronos, Kairos, and the Dynamics of Desire

In psychoanalysis, as in life, the interplay of *Chronos* and *Kairos* reflects the dynamic tension between the continuous flow of time and the possibility of *rupture*, where the *cut* offers a moment for the *Real* to intrude and reshape the structure of desire. The melancholic, fixated on the past and bound by the *Chronos* of their symptoms, finds their salvation not in continuing along the same path, but in the *Kairotic moment*—the *analyst's intervention* that cuts into the temporal flow, opening a space for something new to emerge.

The *quilting point* in the *Graph of Desire*, too, represents this decisive *Kairotic moment*, where *meaning is anchored*, and the *disruption of desire* is simultaneously an opportunity for its reconfiguration. In this way, *melancholia* becomes a site where *Chronos* and *Kairos* are most dramatically intertwined: the *weight of time* becomes a suffocating force, yet the potential for liberation always exists in the form of an *intervention*—the *cut* that introduces a new vector into the flatline of *Chronos*.

Ultimately, Dürer's angel stands as a figure poised between the oppressive weight of *Chronos* and the latent possibility of *Kairos*. The tools lie ready, the sandglass ticks away, and the moment of transformation hovers just beyond reach—waiting for the intervention that could *break the loop* and *reopen* the future to *desire*.

The Braided Timepiece of Passau: Chronos, Kairos, and the Threads of Desire

In the Bavarian town of Passau, a sundial stands as an eloquent metaphor for the interplay between time and human existence, blending the mechanical precision of Chronos with the vibrant potential of Kairos. The shadow of the arrow, cast by the sun, traverses a braid of red, yellow, and green ribbons, recalling Lacan's Borromean knot, where three distinct yet interlocking elements—real, symbolic, and imaginary—form a structure of meaning and subjectivity. The sundial's arrow, a symbol of Kairos, moves through time as if searching for the perfect moment to intervene, to cut through the ordinary sequence of events and bring forth the decisive instant—a flash of Kairotic time that alters the flow of existence. The braid, weaving together different colors, represents the entanglement of faith (Glaube), hope (Hoffnung), and love (Liebe). These elements, guided by the shadow's path, find their orientation not within the mechanical gears of time/curls of braidle/etc. but through the ruptures that Kairos brings with its arrow from without. In this context, the Arabic word عقربه (*aqrab-e*), for this arrow meaning both *arrow* and *scorpion*, adds to this dense web of meaning. Like the scorpion, Kairos has a sting—it pierces through the ordinary flow of life, much like the sundial's arrow cuts through time.

Passau Sundial: *Glaube, Hoffnung und Leben weisen durch das Zeitgetriebe (Faith, hope, and life guide through the machinery of time.)* The shadow of the arrow moves across a braid of red, yellow, and green ribbons, symbolizing the intertwined paths of faith, hope, and love as they navigate the gears of time. Echoing Lacan's Borromean knot, this sundial captures the tension between Chronos and Kairos, marking time not just as a sequence but as an invitation for decisive moments that cut through the fabric of existence.

The Four Clocks: Living Between Kairos and Chronos

The clock is not a mere device for measuring time but a metaphorical space where these two forces interact. In the *sun clock* above, the space is halved, and the arrow, or gnomon, casts its shadow, reflecting the sun's light in inverse direction. Half the universe, half its indication embodied in its inversion. A hand-watch in return mirrors the whole cosmos in its full absence—imagine a sun clock that its half-circle devours the mechanics of the universe working above in the sky in its saw-wheels. Now the central point acts as a singularity. From this singularity, *Kairos* arises, indexed as the contingent event, bursting forth as the arrow of opportune/fortune from the core that has metaphorically consumed the universe. Here, *Chronos*—represented by the undifferentiated numbers—remains in the background, a passive medium awaiting the active intervention of *Kairos*, the arrow that gives time its meaning through the inversive act of the universe that it swallowed a model of it in its stomach. An arrow is pointing outward from the mechanical heart of the clock. The Fibonacci clock is just a negative clock, turning time into place and place into time. The dominance of the arrow as pattern over magnitude in the Fibonacci sequence illustrates this: though *Chronos* counts the steps, *Kairos* determines when the leap will occur.

In the *hourglass*, which for good reasons is crucial for our understanding of melancholia, we witness the *Chronos-Kairos* dialectic in its rawest form. Here, time is sand: each grain a living arrow, a vector, a hint that propels the fall from one layer of death to another, from one zone of inertia to another. The grains of sand act as mini *Kairoi*, filling the shape of time with their steady descent. The sand clock's layers are two parallel planes of death, or boredom, if you will—places where time seems to die, only to be reborn through the movement of the falling grains. They lay dying on the other side again. They turn back to what they were: *Chronos*. It is here

that *Chronos* turns into itself, each grain marking the small, imperceptible *Kairotic* moments that keep time alive, stitching together *Chronos* and *Kairos* in a web of becoming.